

The Image of Women in Indian Television

by Chitra Radhakrishnan

"One is not born a woman but made."
- Simone de Beauvoir

This article is an attempt to analyse the construction of gender and nation in Indian television channels and thereby to highlight the ideological beliefs and assumptions underlying and reinforcing these stereotypical definitions of Indian womanhood.

Prahlad Kakkar, owner of an advertising agency in North India, has observed, "The household image of woman is truly exploitative; showing women as dowdy, unattractive housewives who slave for their families without any personal ambition is enslaving." While this observation is perfectly true the latter part of his argument is convoluted. He proceeds to proclaim, "Lalitha (a woman character made popular by the advertisement for "Surf," a detergent, where she is depicted as the smart housewife getting the best soap powder for her family even while saving money) is far more exploitative than a deadly bikini-clad woman on top of a Porsche. I truly believe that an ad that shows a woman as a sex object is not exploitative, it is just blatant and obvious. Yes, I exploit women because they are far more aes-

thetically beautiful than men. Since men are the main purchasing power of India today, the image of a scantily-clad woman will make them buy anything." (Savvy, August 2000).

This unashamed confession sums up the attitude of men behind the Indian television screen. In what way is "blatant and obvious" better than "exploitative?" And how could scantily-clad women models who lie idly (and supposedly sensuously) on male power symbols like cars become better role models for women than the newly constructed smart Indian woman who steps outside her domestic domain only to add a convenient (for men of course) dimension to her role of housewife? Both are stereotypes. The modern housewife (modern in the sense that she dares/is permitted to argue with the shop owner since a woman talking to a stranger is not appreciated in traditional Indian households) perpetuates the traditional roles allotted to women. The skimpily dressed model creeps into many vulnerable heads as the ideal dream woman. The beauty queens mushrooming all over India (thanks to the large international markets opening for cosmetics manufacturers in developing countries) have already mesmerised the minds of thousands of young women

as to what should be the size and weight of an ultimate woman.

To the Indian mass media a woman's body is not only a locale for violence, exclusion and abuse but also the site for the construction of modernity and an upper-caste (Brahminical) Hindu nation. There is the prevalent perception of India and women as "culture" and history is denied to both through deliberate decontextualisation. The "new" woman is intrinsically related to the "true" identity of the nation and hence it becomes necessary for the oppressive patriarchal tradition to patrol and monitor the woman's body and sexuality. A brief scrutiny of a few advertisements and pop albums reveals the popular conception of the Indian woman as the lone bearer of Indian tradition and the sign of the "modern" Hindu nation-state.

An advertisement for Parry candy begins with a shot focusing on a modern young Indian male and a Western woman with blonde hair, both of whom are engaged in a romantic interlude. The young man approaches her with a string of flowers (a cultural commodity carried by an Indian male during his mission of proposing to a woman). When he attempts to place it in her hair he is interrupted by an Indian woman dressed in the traditional Hindu sari and with vermilion on her forehead, carrying a plate of Parry candies. Seeing the candy and more importantly, her, the Son of Hindustan gets a radiant glow in his face. He offers the flow-

ers to her instead, spurning the non-Indian. This alien cultural product stands alone with an expression of lament at having lost an invaluable prize catch.

Commercials in Indian television channels claim to redefine the discourses of women's liberation and modernity but end up highlighting and reinforcing the prejudices of upper-caste males.

The blurb for the softdrink "Asli Mango" (meaning "original mango" in Hindi) presents a young man in Western attire who boasts, in an American accent, of his female conquests abroad. When his mother appears on the scene with the "Asli" i.e., "true" mango drink, multimedia techniques transform him into a standing symbol of Indian heritage. He then expresses his unquenchable thirst for Indianism by imploring his mother to get a native fruit, a "true good Hindustani" bride for him. The fervent nationalist motto, "Be Indian, buy Indian goods" is extended by the male-centred media as "Be Indian, buy Indian women."

The advertisement for "Harpic," a toilet cleaning liquid, begins with a grand sequence of shots showing a group of masked commandos wear-

ing thick protective attire. They land from a plane and search the entire locality with modern equipment. When they reach the toilet they find the place swarming with germs. At this point their chief removes her facemask and we see an attractive woman tossing her hair and smiling at the audience victoriously. Then comes the caption with the declaration "Here comes the expert in cleaning toilets." After zooming in on the smiling face of the woman, the Harpic container is shown on the screen.

In the commercial for "Axe," a shaving lotion for men, a black woman in a skin-tight dress dances before the sharp gaze of a man. When she comes near him she turns into the wick of a huge candle. His face is now enlarged and covers the entire screen. He looks down at the candle in which the woman-turned-wick keeps flickering in a dance of its own. The word "Voodoo" appears on the screen along with the flame. With a look of contempt, he blows out the candle and as the candle smoke dissolves in the air, smiles smugly at the audience. He is satisfied at having put an end to a tempting woman, and the award for such a manly achievement is "Axe," and now the conqueror from time immemorial grabs a bottle of the lotion with a celebratory look.

The advertisement for "Anandham" (meaning happiness) gingelly oil starts with a conversation between two women. One asks the other what real happiness is like, and the latter replies that it is to interview

her suitor before consenting to marry him. (This is an important ritual in the life of an Indian woman. Accompanied by his parents and other relatives, the prospective bridegroom comes to see the bride to ask for her approval. The bride would be asked to sing and her parents list her feminine skills such as embroidery, creating designs with coloured powder and cooking, while praising her docility and thus her eligibility to be an ideal daughter-in-law.) The woman in the advertisement adds that she would derive happiness from asking "daring" questions such as whether he would drink liquor, if he would demand dowry and whether he would beat her. Aspiring to put such questions to a man, by itself, is an act of revolution in the traditional Tamil context. The woman who is listening puts an end to this attempt at puncturing tradition and says with rapture that happiness does not lie in these but in buying the particular brand of cooking oil. So, it is the feminine act of cooking that will bless an Indian woman with happiness, and not her forthrightness or her courage to question male prejudices. The advertiser was clever indeed to choose a woman to snub the impertinence of another woman. This strategy would prove effective in placing the responsibility or blame for women's oppression on women themselves as has been the habit of men whenever they wish to hit back at the idea of women's liberation.

"Mystic Rhythms," a pop album oft-telecast on Zee TV, visualises a set

of Indian men dressed in Western attire claiming to descend from America and a group of women draped in half-saris (a typical South Indian attire). The young men chase

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the young women and sing teasing songs, expressing their desire to possess them. This "East meets West" encounter is presented as an essentially Hindu national experience when the Westernised modern male's claim upon the female is legitimised with the approval of the Hindu religion. One of the men approaches a Brahmin priest and points out the Hindu woman (carrying religious marks such as vermilion and sacred ash on her forehead, after which the religious agent looks the woman over, assessing her suitability for the male. Fully satisfied, the priest cheerfully allows the obedient young man to claim his stake and to institutionalise his desire (through a Hindu marriage).

It is interesting to note that, cutting across boundaries of age and species, the women in this visual become the objects of the gaze not only of the male protagonist but also of an old man, a male child, a goat and a dog.

The pop video album "Hum Hain Indian" was produced by the Mumbai BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) legislator Abhiram Singh to celebrate India's nuclear status (Pokhran tests) in May 1998. During the launch he remarked, "This is to initiate the national celebration of our Shakti." Shakti, the Hindu postulate, is fascinatingly politicised to highlight Hindu superiority. This timely invocation of the seemingly ahistorical Shakti, a Sanskrit term meaning strength, always represented in India by a Hindu female figure, is undoubtedly an attempt to mobilise all Indian women by fabricating a classless, casteless homogenous Hindu category that would be worthy of the respect of every Indian citizen, Hindu, Christian and Muslim alike.

The television serials are no better. Good women do not raise their voices against ill-treatment and men take second wives only because the first wife is a shrew (hence the sentiment that "what else can the man do?"). The husband and the *mangalsutra* (the holy thread tied around the bride's neck during the wedding ceremony) are to be worshipped; the educated girl in jeans has loose morals and symbolises the corrupted youth who turn their back on Indian culture. The producers and

directors of these serials, which capture the undivided attention of women who stay at home, ignore the care that has to be exercised by them because they have the power to shape public opinion.

And the tragedy is that women allow themselves to be deceived and demeaned by those who exploit them in the name of art or freedom of expression.

I end my analysis with a few observations:

1. It is interesting to note that whenever non-Indians prefer to exalt Indian culture they focus only on the "high culture," i.e., the upper-caste Hindu culture with its Sanskrit leanings and not on the "other," supposedly "low" culture. And more significantly, whenever the patriots attempt to resist Western cultural invasions they repeatedly invoke the superiority of "Bharat Matha" (Mother India) and the antiquity of Sanskrit and Brahminical culture (including their gods and prayer rituals) thereby pushing once again "low culture" to the dark recesses of history. The problem lies in "what and whose ancient heritage" becomes the focal point of all pride and admiration.

2. The middle/upper-middle-class Hindu patriarchal morality is viewed as "normalcy" and any deviation is castigated. Commercials in Indian television channels claim to redefine the discourses of women's liberation and modernity but end up highlighting and reinforcing the prejudices of

upper-caste males. The advertiser does not question the privilege of male domination but recasts it into the

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mainstream Hindu mould to secure approval from the "majority."

3. There is allowance, however grudging, for appropriation of Western culture, however corruptive, by Indian men.

4. Upper-caste/class Hinduism is repeatedly presented as "the only good" and "the powerful" way of living in order to be a decent and patriotic Indian citizen. Indian women thus become the "nation" to be conquered and retained.

The difference between the advertisements of the 1960s and the 1990s lies only in the portrayal of the "modern" woman. The woman in the

1950s was either docile or a vamp—the former with a shy expression on a down-turned face, fully clad in sari, with big vermilion and flowers; the latter in short "indecent" attire, with a sensuous gaze and pouting smile and without vermilion and flowers. Since the 1990s the modern woman is one who no longer wears the sari; she appears without vermilion, a Hindu marker, thus affirming her secularity, and she does not necessarily sport a shy look (though it is the preferred pose). But her societal status has not changed in any drastic way as her roles are defined even now by men. Washing machines and microwave ovens "liberate" Indian women by moulding them into "perfect homemakers" (as the advertisement for a washing machine says, "You and Videocon, the perfect homemakers").

This seemingly "modern, liberated" image is more dangerous since every woman aspiring to be "modern" identifies herself with these willing carriers of nationalist, religious and feminine sensibilities and ends up transforming herself accordingly. Women models thus become models for women. Doesn't it remind us of what Chinua Achebe has said, "Stories define Us?"

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